

# THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

*The  
Human Account*

as described by eye-witnesses in seven  
moving letters written by men and women  
who experienced its terrors

*With an introduction by PAUL M. ANGLE*

THE  
GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

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Here is the Great Chicago Fire of 1871—the catastrophe which, in little more than twenty-four hours, took 300 lives, left 90,000 people homeless, and destroyed property worth \$200,000,000—described in letters written by men and women who lived through it.

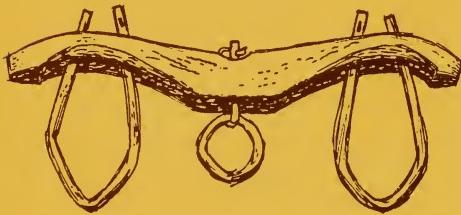
Written during the Fire and immediately afterward, these artless letters convey the terrors of the moment—flame-swept streets, anguished crowds, buildings that melted in minutes—with a vividness that no reader can forget. There may be more scholarly, more comprehensive accounts of Chicago's Great Fire, but none approaches this in realism that is almost photographic.

Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by Paul M. Angle, Director, The Chicago Historical Society. Published by the Society in commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Fire.

THE  
GREAT CHICAGO FIRE



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*The  
Great Chicago  
Fire*



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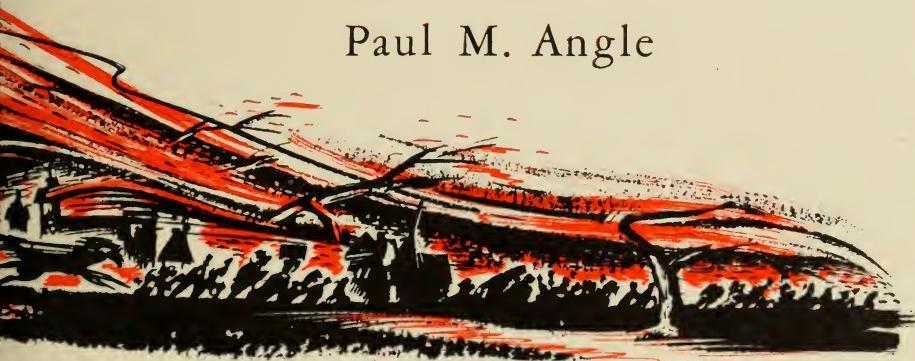
*by Joseph Trautwein*

# THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

DESCRIBED IN SEVEN LETTERS BY MEN  
AND WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCED ITS  
HORRORS, AND NOW PUBLISHED IN COM-  
MEMORATION OF THE SEVENTY-FIFTH  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE CATASTROPHE

*Introduction and Notes by*

Paul M. Angle



THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Chicago, Illinois \* 1946*

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Jessie L. Brown

## FOREWORD

THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE of 1871 was the most spectacular event in the city's history. It became a livid scar of memory for those who experienced it; even today it is the one episode of a great city's manifold past that the youngest schoolchild is certain to know. And even today, though seventy-five years have passed, it points morals. Its story continues to warn that only the narrowest margin separates man from nature, and that nature, ordinarily kindly, may be implacably destructive. It is also proof of man's ability, given faith, courage, and determination, to surmount even the greatest catastrophe.



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# *Introduction*



BETWEEN THE EARLY evening of Sunday, October 8, 1871, and the early morning of Tuesday, October 10, fire destroyed practically every building in an area of three and a third square miles in the heart of Chicago. Property valued at \$200,000,000 was turned into rubble, 90,000 people were left homeless, 300 lost their lives. The common designation, the "Great Chicago Fire," is understatement: it was the most destructive fire in American history.

On that Sunday seventy-five years ago Chicago enjoyed a warm bright day. Yet most of its 335,000 inhabitants would have preferred less pleasant weather. For three months almost no rain had fallen, already the trees had shed most of their leaves, the lawns were parched, wells were dry. Chicago, moreover, was built of wood. Thoughtful residents knew what might happen if a fire should get out of control.

In the last few days they had had grim warnings. On Saturday, September 30, the Burlington warehouse on 16th Street near State burned with a loss of more than \$600,000. During the

next week there was a succession of fires, but not until Saturday, October 7, did one turn out to be disastrous. Then, an hour or two before midnight, a planing mill on Canal Street between Jackson and Van Buren caught fire. Before the firemen reached the scene it was almost destroyed, and adjacent buildings were aflame. The entire department was called out. By intelligent, courageous work the men finally brought the fire under control, but not until it had consumed four square blocks and damaged property to the amount of \$750,000. And that was not all: the fire had also taken a heavy toll of the department. Several pieces of apparatus were destroyed or put out of commission, and after sixteen hours of arduous, dangerous work, hardly more than half of the men were fit for duty.

Thus the stage was set for tragedy when the O'Leary cowbarn, at the rear of 137 De Koven Street, caught fire about 8:45 on the evening of Sunday, October 8.<sup>1</sup> There is no need here for a detailed account of the way in which the fire got out of control. It is enough to say that the wooden city tinder-dry from drought, a strong southwest wind, an exhausted fire department, and considerable bungling combined to take the fire out of man's hands before it had burned two hours.

The fire started on the West Side about three-eighths of a mile west of the South Branch of the Chicago River. Before midnight it had jumped across the river, and was moving rapidly in a northeasterly direction. By 1:30 on the morning of Monday,

<sup>1</sup>Here, as throughout this Introduction, I rely on H. A. Musham, "The Great Chicago Fire, October 8-10, 1871," *Papers in Illinois History*, 1940 (Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, 1941). Although the word is badly overworked, "masterly" is the only adjective that fits this monograph.

*October 9, the courthouse and other buildings in the very heart of the business district were ablaze. By 2:30 it had spanned the river itself and was attacking the North Side fiercely. In another hour the waterworks at Chicago Avenue and Pine Street (now Michigan Avenue) was blazing so fiercely that the workmen on duty there were forced to abandon it.*

*During most of Monday, October 9, the fire ranged over the North Side, sweeping as far north as Fullerton Avenue (then the city limits) and wiping out sections which had escaped the night before. At the same time it completed the destruction of the business district. By late afternoon, however, it was almost burned out. Rain, commencing shortly before midnight, helped to put an end to the holocaust.*

*The scene on Tuesday morning was one of almost complete desolation. With the exception of an unfinished building at La Salle and Monroe streets and a fortunate structure at Market and Randolph, the entire business district was gone. On the North Side only two houses were spared: one near Hubbard and Kingsbury streets, the other the home of Mahlon Ogden at Dearborn and White (now Walton), where the Newberry Library stands. In the much smaller burned area on the West Side a handful of buildings had escaped. Among them, by a grim joke, was the O'Leary cottage. The burnt area extended north and south for four and three-quarter miles, and had an average width of one mile. Within these limits, there were only smoking ruins.*

*One phenomenon of the fire deserves special comment. In almost every letter written about it, in almost every recorded reminiscence, there is awed reference to the high wind that*

burled burning planks and fire brands through the air for hundreds of yards and sent walls of flame through whole blocks almost instantaneously. Colonel H. A. Musham has pointed out that at no time during the fire did the wind reach a velocity of more than thirty miles an hour, and that a wind of this force cannot lift large objects into the air and burl them long distances. The gale-like winds, in fact, were convection whirls, or "fire devils"—whirling masses of fire and superheated air—generated by the fire itself. These, more than any other factor, accounted for the lightning-like spread of the flames. "They carried burning brands, sparks and masses of fire forward for distances up to three-eighths of a mile," Colonel Musham writes. "The destruction of the city can be said to have been brought about by fire spilled progressively on it by these fire devils which started new fires far in advance of those from which they arose; these, assisted by showers of sparks and masses of superheated air, formed new centers of destruction, from which fire literally flowed in all directions, particularly to the north and northeast, which ceased only when there was nothing more to burn."<sup>2</sup>

The fire over, the people of Chicago set out at once to alleviate the suffering of the victims. A temporary relief committee was organized, schools and churches were opened to the homeless, food and clothing were distributed. On October 13 the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, an established organization, was selected to distribute the supplies and handle the money which by then were pouring in from other parts of the country. So well

<sup>2</sup>"Great Chicago Fire," 166-67.

*did it do its work, and so generous was the response of those who had escaped the fire's destruction, that no one went homeless or hungry during the ensuing winter.*

\* \* \* \*

*The seven letters presented here are all in the collection of the Chicago Historical Society. They are published in commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the fire, but it is hoped that they will also serve as a reminder of the rich historical materials, both published and in manuscript, that are to be found in the Society's Library.*

*All illustrations are from the Society's collections.*

*For the reader's convenience punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing have been made uniform, and an occasional misspelled word has been corrected. Otherwise no liberties have been taken with the texts.*

*In the preparation of this publication I have received valuable aid from Violett P. Richardson and Teresa Schmid of the Society's staff. This I acknowledge gratefully.*

PAUL M. ANGLE

*The Chicago Historical Society.*



JONAS HUTCHINSON, lawyer and notary public with an office at 86 Washington Street, writes to his mother, Mrs. Betsey Hutchinson of Milford, New Hampshire.



*Chicago, Oct. 9*

DEAR MOTHER,

This has been an eventful day. Last night about 9 1/2 o'clock a fire broke out here & from that time to this it has raged fearfully. *We are in ruins.* All the business portion of the city has fallen a prey to the fiery fiend. Our magnificent streets for acres & acres lined with elegant structures are a heap of sightless rubbish. It cannot be described. One needs to see the wreck to appreciate it & then he cannot believe that such havoc could be wrought in so short a time. Had you been with me all night & all day seeing this hell of fire doing its awful mission then you could realize how these ruins came. What a sight: a sea of fire, the heavens all ablaze, the air filled with burning embers, the wind blowing fiercely & tossing fire brands in all directions, thousands upon thousands of people rushing frantically about, burned out of shelter, without food, the rich of yesterday poor today, destruction everywhere—is it not awful? It makes me sick. One could but exclaim: "My God, when will it end!"

The end is not yet. Terribly is the fire now burning, though 'tis five miles from where I write so I am in no danger, though our family dare not go to bed. They are camped on the floor. 'Tis midnight and I am keeping watch. Everything is gone—all our public buildings & massive blocks, all the hotels except one & that a minor one, the courthouse & records, post office & United States courthouse—all, all are gone. This is too true. I wish it were other [wise].

The fire extended over acres of ground & it left nothing intact. Our banks are all included in this heartrending catastrophe. I had a few hundred dollars in the Merchants & this is lost. I am discouraged & what to do I know not. My office burned about three o'clock this morning. I barely got out a few papers & just escaped with my life. As I reached the street, the street was full of flames & smoke. I had to run for dear life. \$5000 worth of books besides furniture fed the flames & as I went out, not to enter again, leaving all that valuable stuff to be devoured, I could but cry. Mr. Roberts,<sup>1</sup> whose library & building this was, & who is my dearest friend here, & with whom I am connected in business, loses all & is tonight a sad poor man. I had many things in the office. They all went—I saved nothing. Mrs. Thomas with [whom] I board loses nearly everything. Our house tonight is like the house of death.

The whole city is in grief. Insurance companies can pay nothing.<sup>2</sup> Two blocks that I had charge of as to renting & collecting rents & for which I received \$500 yearly are among the things of the past. My office is gone. I am stripped and you may conclude that I am about vanquished. I cannot see any way to

<sup>1</sup>James H. Roberts, lawyer, practicing with Samuel B. Gookins under the firm name of Gookins & Roberts at 86 Washington Street.

<sup>2</sup>A premature conclusion. Approximately \$88,000,000 in insurance was carried on the buildings in the burnt area. Of this amount, between \$45,000,000 and \$50,000,000 was paid.



*The  
O'Leary Cottage  
After the Fire*

get along here. Thirty years of prosperity cannot restore us. It looks as though I must leave here & what to do I know not—possibly I may come home. All newspaper offices are destroyed. When we get papers I'll send them. I am going to try & sleep a little if possible now.

*Thy boy,*

JONAS.

Ed Lovejoy was in for it too. This morning I was strolling along the street & someone caught hold of me. I looked [and] I saw Ed sitting on a couple of drawers filled with pictures.<sup>3</sup> "Well," said I, "Ed, you are gone up, too." "Yes," says he, "this is all that's left." The jail doors were thrown open & the prisoners rushed into the streets & took to their heels. The jail was under the courthouse which burnt. Probably many lives were lost yet I can learn nothing definite as yet.

JONAS.

P.S. We have no gas or water. We have to bail water from [the] lake & use candles. Bridges burnt.

*Chicago, Oct. 10, '71  
Midnight*

DEAR MOTHER,

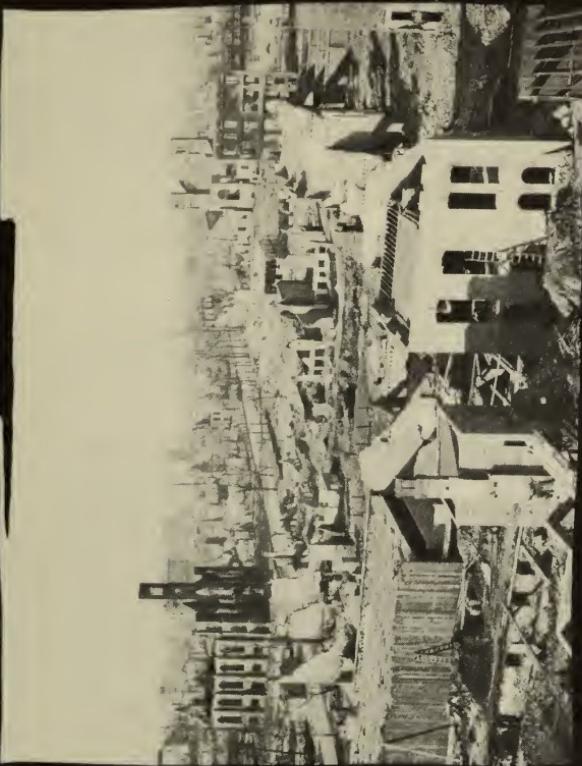
Last night I wrote you. Tonight I am sitting up and I must tell you more about our great calamity. Ere this reaches you the telegraph & my former letter will give you a faint idea of this sad affliction. Nothing that may come to you can overstate the facts. Two hundred millions of property have been destroyed, 300 acres<sup>4</sup> have been swept by the besom of destruction. 100,000 people are homeless and the greater portion of them

<sup>3</sup>Lovejoy was a maker of stereoscopic views.

<sup>4</sup>The burned area covered 2,124 acres. The writer's other figures are approximately correct.

*The  
Heart of Chicago*

*Looking North from  
Congress Street, Near Wabash*



paupers. Only one house stands in the entire North Division and one also in the South Division.

As far as the fire reached the city is thronged with desperadoes who are plundering & trying to set new fires. The police are vigilant. Thousands of special police are on duty. Every block has its patrolmen and instructions are explicit to each officer to shoot any man who acts suspicious and will not answer when spoken [to] the second time. Several were shot & others hung to lamp posts last night under these instructions. The origin of the fire is not known. 40 poor people perished on the prairie last night. Schoolhouses & churches are used to house the destitute. 50 carloads of cooked provisions are on the road from St. Louis & the same from Cincinnati. Genl. Sherman I am informed is here with 5000 troops to protect the citizens.<sup>5</sup> The roughs are improving the time to sack & pillage. The city is in darkness, no gas. 50,000 army tents are being pitched to house the poor.

The like of this sight since Sodom & Gomorrha has never met human vision. No pen can tell what a ruin this is. Frank Peabody, Mark Knowlton, Ed Lovejoy, George Lovejoy, Wright's Stable, Dave Bradley (Lizzie's husband), Willard Bacon, Charlie Briles, Charlie Towne—all of these are known to some of the family, and all burned out. Imagine all of Boston, its business blocks all in ruin & 100,000 of its people homeless, and you will then get an idea of our condition. The railroads are carrying free such of the poor as will go into the country.

The fire extended 5 miles north & south and 2/3 of the way east & west & mind you, it missed nothing in its march. No buildings stand half-demolished & nearly every brick & stone

<sup>5</sup>It was Gen. Phil Sheridan, not General Sherman, who, on his own initiative, ordered two companies of infantry from Fort Omaha to Chicago on October 9. By October 12 ten companies of regular infantry and seven companies of state militia were on patrol duty.

# PROCLAMATION!

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In consequence of the great calamity that has befallen our city, and for the preservation of good order, it is ordered by the Mayor and Common Council of Chicago, that no liquor be sold in any Saloon until further orders. The Board of Police are charged with the execution of this order.

R. B. MASON, Mayor.

Chicago, Oct. 9. 1871.

wall has tumbled to the ground. The courthouse & post office walls mostly stand though entirely gutted. Here & there a tall jagged piece of wall limps its form above the chaotic mass of brick & stone. These ghastly obelisks are the only signboards to tell the stroller among the ruins where he is. In groping among the ruins one has to ask where such a street *was* in order to get his bearings. The debris is still smouldering. You can't see far so 'tis easy to get astray. I don't know what I shall do.

JONAS.

*Letter of MARY FALES (Mrs. David Fales) to her Mother. David Fales was a lawyer with an office in the Portland Block, 135 Dearborn. The Fales residence stood on W. White Street (now Locust Street) near LaSalle.*



*Chicago, Oct. 10, 1871*

DEAR MAMMA,

You have probably heard of our fire and will be glad to know that we are safe and sound after much tribulation.

Sunday night a fire broke out on the West Side about three miles southwest of us. The wind was very high and David said it was a bad night for a fire. About two o'clock we were awakened by a very bright light and a great noise of carts and wagons. Upon examination David found that the fire was not at all on the North Side but was burning so furiously on the South Side that the whole sky was bright. They thought it would stop on the South side when it came to the river, but it proved no obstacle and the North Side was soon on fire and Wells and LaSalle streets were crowded with carts and people going north.

We soon saw that with such a wind it would soon reach our neighborhood and David told me to pack what I most valued. It seemed useless to pack in trunks as every vehicle of any kind was engaged and demanded an enormous price. Several livery

stables were already burned and loose horses were plenty. One of the Wheeler boys had a horse given him for nothing excepting a promise to lead it to a safe place. He brought it home and tied it in their yard. Having no wagon it was of no use to them. So David took it and after a while succeeded in finding a no-top buggy. We felt very lucky as nobody around could get either horse or conveyance. David packed it full of things, set me and himself on top, and started off to the Hutchinsons.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot convey to you the way the streets looked. Everybody was out of their houses without one exception, and the sidewalks were covered with furniture and bundles of every description. The middle of the street was a jam of carts, carriages, wheelbarrows, and every sort of vehicle, and many horses being led along, all excited and prancing, some running away. I scarcely dared look right or left as I kept my seat by holding tightly to the trunk. The horse would not be restrained and I had to use all my powers to keep on. I was glad to go fast, for the fire behind us raged and crackled, and the whole earth, or all we saw of it, was a lurid yellowish red.

David left me at Aunt Eng's and went off for another load of things. This he soon brought back and then he went off again, and I saw him no more for seven hours. People came crowding to Aunt Eng's and the house was full of people they never saw before, and their luggage. One young lady [who] was to have had a fine wedding tomorrow came dragging along some of her wedding presents. One lady came with four servants and one with six blankets full of clothing. One lady came with nurse and baby, and missing her little boy, went off to look for him. This was about daylight and she did not come back at all.

<sup>1</sup>Probably the residence of C. N. A. Hutchinson, just north of Lincoln Park and presumably safe. The "Aunt Eng" of this letter appears to have been Mrs. Hutchinson.

*Randolph Street Ruins,  
with the Courthouse  
in the Foreground*



Now and then somebody's husband would come back for a minute, but there was work for everybody and they only stayed long enough to say the fire advanced, and assure us of safety.

At twelve David came and said that he got everything out of our house, and buried the piano and books together with the china in Mr. Hubbard's ground.<sup>2</sup> He saw people taking off all the chairs, tables, and light furniture without saying a word for he knew it would burn even in the street, and my nice preserves which Maggie had set out on the piazza he gave freely to anybody that had a mind to take them. The Hubbards thought they were safe in a brick house with so much ground around, but wet their carpets and hung them over the wooden facings for additional safety. All to no purpose. David saw ours burn and fall and then theirs shared the same fate. The McCagg's large house and stables burnt in a few minutes, also the New England church and Mr. Collyer's.<sup>3</sup>

In the afternoon the wind blew more furiously, the dust was blinding, the sky grey and leaden, and the atmosphere dense with smoke. We watched the swarms of wagons and people pass —men, women, and children. All the men and many of the women were dragging trunks by a cord tied in the handle and children were carrying and pulling big bundles.

Soon they said Aunt Eng's house must go too. Then such confusion as there was, everybody trying to get a cart and not one to be had at any price. After a while two of the gentlemen who had had wagons all the time came and carried their wives

<sup>2</sup>Probably the residence of Gurdon S. Hubbard, on N. LaSalle Street near the Fales home.

<sup>3</sup>The residence of Ezra B. McCagg was located on N. Clark Street in what is now the 800 block. The New England Church (Congregational) stood on the corner of Dearborn and White, now Locust, streets. The Collyer house was the residence of the Rev. Robert Collyer, pastor of Unity Church, on Chicago Avenue near the Water Tower.

farther north, and those that were left watched for empty wagons and nobody spoke at all. Mr. Hutchinson, David and some others were taking things out and burying them, and many of the ladies fairly lost their wits. Poor Aunt Eng even talked of sending home a shawl that somebody left there long ago. David started for a cart. Again he was successful and got an old sandcart with no springs, one board out of the bottom, with a horse that had not been out of harness for twenty-four hours. He put in all our things and one trunk of Aunt Eng's, to which Miss M. added a bandbox.

The West Side was safe, but to get there was the question. The bridges were blocked and some burned, but the man who owned the cart thought we could get there. We thought of Judge Porter's and Mr. Dupee's where we thought we should be welcome.<sup>4</sup> Wherever Aunt Eng's family went they must walk, and our prospects seemed so fair that we took May with us. Our ride was an anxious one. The horse had been overused and when urged on would kick till the old cart bid fair to break in pieces, then he would go on, and finally finding kicking no use gave it up, much to my relief. Many times we were blocked and it seemed as if the fire must reach the bridge before we did. But we were much too well off to complain. Some carts had broken down, horses had given out, and many were walking and pulling big things who seemed almost exhausted. Furniture and clothing lay all along the road. Mrs. Hamilton hailed us from a mean little hut two miles from her house and ours and asked us to take a bag of Mr. Hubbard's silver. It must have been some servant's house. Anyway it was burnt soon after and we still have the silver. The fences were broken on all the un-built fields, and furniture and people covering every yard of

<sup>4</sup>Judge William A. Porter of the Superior Court and Charles A. Dupee, lawyer, both of whom lived on Washington Street on the West Side.



The  
Courthouse Before  
the Fire

it. After a ride of two hours and a half we reached Judge Porter's at dusk and found a warm welcome.

Every family that I know on the North Side is burnt out. I can't enumerate them. It would be useless: it is sufficient to say every individual one. We were the only ones who took our things from Aunt Eng's. The lady with the six bundles left five behind her, the lady with the four servants left a bundle of French dresses to burn, but worst of all, the baby and nurse. They went with the Hutchinsons. At the last minute a Miss M. insisted on David's taking charge of her watch. She said she could trust it to no one else and it did not occur to her to keep it herself. All of our clothing is saved and much we have with us.

I never felt so grateful in my life as to hear the rain pour down at three o'clock this morning. That stopped the fire.

The gentlemen have come in, and David says the piano burnt under the ground—nothing left but the iron plate. The North Side is level and the burnt part of the South Side so that the streets are not distinguishable. They say people in every class of life are out of doors. The churches are full and food is sent to them, but hardly anybody has any to spare. It burnt far above Aunt Eng's. My watch was at [the] jewelers, and may have been in a safe, but the safes have not yet been uncovered. I shall write soon again, meanwhile direct to 448 West Washington Street.

MARY.



GEORGE HOWLAND, *principal of Central High School, writes to Selim H. Peabody, professor of physics at the Massachusetts Agricultural College.*



*Chicago, Oct. 14, 1871*

FRIEND PEABODY:

You will pardon my pencil as my inkstand has gone "where the woodbine twineth," with most of my possessions, though I am comfortably located for the time being. The schools are all closed, though I think they will begin to open them one by one as soon as they are free of the homeless, and the water works are in operation. Whether they will start the High School I don't know. It is taken temporarily for the courts, till they can erect a hasty structure on the old ground. I saved one trunk with most of my clothing, but so as by fire [*sic*], and am now at Dupee's, 219 Sangamon St. Wells carried off a carpet bag in each hand and is at Westcott's. Cate was burnt out also.<sup>1</sup>

I noticed the fire soon after getting home from church Sunday evening, and supposing it a continuation of the one the night before, retired about 12 as calm as usual. About two the people of the house rapped at my door to ask if I knew what a

<sup>1</sup>Oliver S. Westcott and Albion Cate were teachers at the Chicago High School. Wells cannot be identified.

**NO MURKIN PEOPLE ON ROCK ISLAND.**

**The Homeless and Starving Citizens of Chicago call for Cooked Food.**

**Let every family in the City cook food and deliver it at the Court House (for the 1st and 2d wards,) and at the Depot of the Chicago Rock Island & Pacific railroad Company, (for the 3d and 4th wards,) by five o'clock this evening. Boiled and Roast meats, hams, poultry and bread are particularly desired. It is necessary to send a car load by the evening train.**

**A meeting of the citizens will be held at the Court House at 12 o'clock, M. to-day to appoint committeees and organize.**

**LET ALL ATTEND.**

**E. CARTER, Mayor.**

**Rock Island, Oct. 10, 1871.**

fire there was. I thought there was no danger to us, and as I have not run with the machine lately, was about going to bed again, as a gentleman in the next room did, but hearing the remarks of some people in the street concluded to go down. The sparks were falling like snowflakes, and the wind blowing a gale, but no more, I thought, than the previous night.

I went over [to] the South Side and found it [the fire] then on the courthouse. People thought that as it had got among the brick & stone it would be retarded. I went back and watched it pushing on to the lake, till a quarter to four, when my brother, who had been driven out, came in and told me that I would have to move. I told him I thought not as it was past us already, and told him that I would make him a cup of coffee. To be ready for all emergencies I meanwhile packed one trunk & carpet bag, while he went to look at the fire. I was just pouring my coffee, when hearing a crackling, I went to the door and found the roof all on fire. As I wanted his help to carry my trunk, I seized my carpet bag and ran down across Clark St. and leaving it on the sidewalk, went for the trunk, dragged it by one handle down the stairs & out into the street—as the sidewalk was on fire—across Clark St., obtained help to carry them a block or two farther, and sat down on the trunk to rest & meditate.

The fire still coming, I asked a man riding by to take in my trunk, and I trotted by his side like little Julius [?] over Indiana Street<sup>2</sup> bridge & to Washington Street. He had a little before left his wife & little boy on the cor. of Madison & State & been unable to return to them. I afterward went back up to Sabin's, who was just starting his family to the Newberry School.<sup>3</sup> Later

<sup>2</sup>Now Grand Avenue.

<sup>3</sup>The Newberry School stood at the corner of Orchard and Willow streets. Albert R. Sabin was its principal.

in the day he was compelled to start west & was overtaken by a farmer who carried them to Jefferson. He is going out to Rockford, Monday, to try some concerts.

Engines seemed entirely useless. The long tongues of flame would dart out over a whole block, then come back & lap it all up clean. Iron & stone seemed to come down as in a blast furnace. A single frame house on the North Side, north of Washington Park stands uninjured. Miss Warne was driven down to the sands<sup>4</sup> and stood in the water almost all day, some of the time being compelled to bury her face in the wet sand. Rev. Mr. Swing slept, I am told, up in the cemetery,<sup>5</sup> Chamberlain north of the park on a shed, I on Dr. Foster's home grounds.<sup>6</sup>

Today it has been raining all day, which relieves the anxiety a little. I have been out on patrol a part of three nights. Monday night they did not allow a fire to be lighted in the city, even for tea, & forbid all smoking, stopping men riding in the street with cigars.

You can get a better idea of ruins [here] than by a year of college.

*With kindest regards to you & yours,*

GEO. HOWLAND.

<sup>4</sup>The Sands was a triangular section of swampy, sandy land north of the mouth of the Chicago River.

<sup>5</sup>While the bodies had been removed from the City Cemetery and the tract transformed into Lincoln Park some years before the fire, the empty graves had not yet been filled in. On the night of October 9 they gave shelter to many fugitives other than the Rev. David Swing, pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church and already a controversial figure because of his liberal views. "Chamberlain" was probably Leander T. Chamberlain, pastor of the New England Church.

<sup>6</sup>In the original letter the last words of this sentence are so indistinct as to be practically illegible. This rendering is only a guess.

MRS. AURELIA R. KING, wife of Henry W. King, wholesale clothing merchant, 4 and 6 Lake Street, to friends in the East. The King residence stood on Rush Street near Erie.



*Elmhurst, Du Page County, Illinois*  
*Oct. 21, 1871, Saturday*

MY DEAR FRIENDS ALL,

Your kind and sympathizing letter reached us last evening, and I should not have waited to receive it before telling you of our fearful experiences, only to tell the truth, I have been and still am so bewildered, I can neither think nor write. It seems a year since the fire, and it will be only two weeks tomorrow evening since it occurred.

We had just moved to the city and had settled ourselves for the winter. I had just laid in all my household supplies of every kind, including every winter garment for my children. We were never so comfortably situated in our lives—our new barn completed, our new house nearly done,—in fact we were on the high tide of prosperity a fortnight ago today. Sunday was an uncommon day with us. We had just finished repairs in our church,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Westminster Presbyterian, at Ontario and N. Dearborn streets.



*West End  
of the  
Courthouse*

had a new organ, a new choir, and two wonderful sermons from our beloved pastor, Mr. Swing, had a delightful communion season, and when we went to our beds, were talking of our joys in rather an exultant manner.

At one o'clock we were wakened by shouts of people in the streets declaring the city was on fire—but then the fire was far away on the south side of the river. Mr. King went quite leisurely over town, but soon hurried back with the news that the courthouse, Sherman House, post office, Tremont House, and all the rest of the business portion of the city was in flames, and thought he would go back and keep an eye on his store. He had scarcely been gone fifteen minutes when I saw him rushing back with his porters, bringing the books and papers from the store, with news that everything was burning, that the bridges were on fire, and the North Side was in danger. From that moment the flames ran in our direction, coming faster than a man could run. The rapidity was almost incredible, the wind blew a hurricane, the air was full of burning boards and shingles flying in every direction, and falling everywhere around us. It was all so sudden we did not realize our danger until we saw our Water Works (which were beyond us) were burning, when we gave up all hope, knowing that the water supply must soon be cut off.

We had just time to dress ourselves, tie up a few valuables in sheets, and stuff them into our carriage, when we had to deliberately leave our home and run for our lives. It was two o'clock in the morning when I fled with my little children clinging to me, fled literally in a shower of fire. You could not conceive anything more fearful. The wind was like a tornado, and I held fast to my little ones, fearing they would be lifted from my sight. I could only think of Sodom or Pompeii, and truly I thought the day of judgment had come. It seemed as if the whole world were running like ourselves, fire all around us, and

where should we go? The cry was "North! North!" So thitherward we ran, stopping first at Mr. MacGregor Adams,<sup>2</sup> (you perhaps remember Mrs. Adams was formerly Mrs. Charles King) where we found many fugitives like ourselves, tarrying to take breath, every one asking every other friend: "Are you burned out?"—"What did you save?"—"Where are you going?" then running on further north up Dearborn Street to the house of another friend, followed ever by the fire. On, on we ran, not knowing whither we went till we entered Lincoln Park. There among the empty graves of the old cemetery we sat down, and threw down our bundles until we were warned to flee once more. The dry leaves and even the very ground took fire beneath our feet, and again packing our few worldly effects into our closed carriage we got into a wagon and travelled with thousands of our poor fellow mortals on and on, at last crossing a bridge on North Avenue and reaching the West Side, where we found a conveyance at noon on Monday which brought us out to Elmhurst—the Adamses and ourselves.

I wish I could give you an adequate idea of that flight, but it is impossible. The streets were full of wagons transporting household furniture, people carrying on their backs the little bundles they had saved. Now and then we would pass a friend seated on a truck or a dray, huddling her children together and her two or three little treasures snatched from the burning. It was only by some look of the eye or some motion [that] we could recognize friends—we were all so blackened with dust and smoke. The ladies, many of them, [were] dressed in a nightgown and slippers with the addition of a sacque or a petticoat. Half of the gentlemen were in nightshirts and pantaloons.

<sup>2</sup>On N. LaSalle St. near the beginning of the present 900 block. J. McGregor Adams was a member of the firm of Crerar, Adams & Co., dealers in railway supplies and contractors' materials.

We reached our home at Clover Lawn at six o'clock Monday night, finding Mother and kind neighbors with open arms and sweet sympathy waiting for us. We had had nothing to eat since Sunday at four P.M., and when I said to my little children: "Won't you be glad to get an apple?" they said: "Why, Mamma, haven't we had anything? We didn't know we were hungry." The alarm and strain upon our feelings was so intense that none of us, not even the children, knew what we wanted or what we had been through.

The next day came the anxiety as to the fate of friends, the thrilling accounts of different friends, inquiry into losses, etc., and to this day the excitement increases rather than diminishes. There is so much to see and hear. Our house is full—people coming all the time to talk over respective losses—seamstresses, teachers, workwomen whom we have known, following us out to know what they shall do, what we can do for them. We are much more fortunate than most of our friends in having a roof to cover us, and thankful are we for it, though when we go to Chicago and see the desolation there, see the houseless, homeless creatures there, we feel almost ashamed to be so comfortable.

It is a wonderful change to step from a home where not only every want was satisfied, but luxuries abounded, to a place where we have not the necessities of life, no pins or needles, not a brush or a comb, a knife or a fork—what a contrast! It would have been hard to bear, only that we are every moment seeing or hearing of some one so much poorer than we, that we are in comparison nabobs. Then too, there is a little touch of the ludicrous now and then which cheers us. Imagine your friend Aurelia, for instance, with a thousand dollar India shawl and a lavender silk with a velvet flounce, and not a chemise to her back!<sup>3</sup>—not a pocket handkerchief to wipe the soot from her

<sup>3</sup>Mrs. King is describing herself.



*Lake Shore and Michigan Southern  
Railroad Station, Van Buren at  
La Salle Street*



face. A friend of mine saved nothing but a white tulle dress. Another lady has a pink silk dress but no stockings. I went to town yesterday, and was the envy and admiration of my Chicago friends because I had clean cuffs and a collar. I had to own at last that they were stolen. It was said that when the fire was raging, one citizen left his house and family, and fled on horseback down Michigan Avenue with his portrait under one arm and his lecture, "Across the Continent," under the other.<sup>4</sup> So, you see, we laugh a little, just enough to keep alive.

It seems to me I can never resume the even tenor of my way, my nerves are so unstrung. I do not sleep at night—when I lose myself for a little while I start up, forever running from fires with my children and a bundle. Yet we are so thankful that if we were to be afflicted, it is only by the loss of property. Our dear ones are all alive and well, and we are happy.

The hope and cheerfulness which our business men preserve is wonderful. The whole business portion of the South Side is in ashes—there is nothing to be seen from the river to Congress Street, that is, two blocks beyond where Mr. Williams used to live. The North Side is entirely destroyed. There is only one house, Mr. Mahlon Ogden's, between the river and Wright's Grove. The fire stopped at Judge Peck's old house—you will remember Jule going there to a party with me. Such destruction is almost incredible. I suppose such a conflagration was never before known.

The sympathy of sister cities and towns is very sweet. Quantities of provisions, clothing, and money are coming in, but the

<sup>4</sup>William Bross, one of Chicago's leading citizens. In the Society's files is a memorandum, written by George M. Higginson in 1881, regarding the Bross incident: "This is probably in part a mere rumor as the citizen mentioned was not one who would leave his family when he considered his house in danger immediately, but he probably thought there was sufficient time to secure some safe deposit for his portrait (which he undoubtedly did) knowing his daughter prized that more than any other household treasure he possessed."

sufferers are so numerous it is hard to meet their wants. Wooden buildings are going up by hundreds, stoves and bedding etc. are coming by thousands. The work of dispensing is in itself stupendous as I have reason to know, as Mr. King is President of the Relief and Aid Society. He has been obliged to delegate his work in great measure to Mr. Dexter<sup>5</sup> and others now, for his business demands much of his time. His personal losses are large, he thinks not less than \$200,000, though he may get more insurance than he expects. He is irrepressible however, full of hope and vim, has taken a store on the West Side, and will open it on Monday next. Mr. Browning, his partner, has been here, and is hopeful and encouraging. I have sent by him to New York for supply of our present needs, and we shall soon have some blankets, pillows, towels, handkerchiefs etc.

Clothing will be easily supplied, but I can't help mourning over my household Gods, the dear things that can never be replaced—my books, the gifts of dear friends, the treasured locks of hair, my Mother's Bible, relics of my little daughter Fanny, my wedding dress, and a thousand things I had saved for my children. My pictures too, and my beautiful statue of the Sleeping Peri that I did delight in—all gone in a minute, and I can't help a little heart-aching, though they are but the things that perish. Why Jule, I haven't a book in the world, not even a Bible. My children grieve over their little treasures and their books, and I cry with them. I saved my baby's portrait and my Mother's and husband's—my silver, my India and lace shawls, and a few silk dresses, my photograph album, and a little jewelry. The above is my stock in trade, and I feel as if my life were beginning again. I have said too much of myself, only I knew those were the things you wished first to know.

<sup>5</sup>Wirt Dexter, railroad lawyer and philanthropist, had been president of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society from 1868 to 1870.

I am going to spend next week in going into the city daily to distribute clothing and food to the suffering, and I want to say to you that if you will have your Blooming Grove contribution sent directly to me, I will distribute to the needy that I know personally. I have already received money and other things from different places which I divide and apportion exactly as I see most pressing need. In so large a work as the present Chicago Relief, there must of course be some donations misapplied. Mr. King feels this, and I thought perhaps it might please your Society to send their supplies where they would reach some of the sufferers directly. I only suggest this, but you may think it wiser to send to the general fund. If you send a letter or anything to me, direct to Elmhurst, Du Page County, Illinois.

I enjoyed the visit of your two brothers amazingly, and grew young in talking of old times. If my house were not already crowded, I would ask you to come out here and look upon the state of things, the like of which was never before known. If either of your brothers has curiosity to come and see, I can give him a lounge to sleep on, and plenty of bread and butter. It is almost impossible to get accommodation in the city, it is so over-crowded. Stores are now re-opening, so we shall, within a week, be able to supply ourselves with shoes and stockings, necessary clothing, and other provisions. We are having delightful weather, which is a great blessing as it gives time for building shanties for the poor, and temporary houses for business. We are all cheerful and hopeful. I have seen only one complainer and that was a millionaire.

Now I have spun you a long yarn without saying much that I wished to, but you must imagine what I had not words to say. With much love to all your family, I am,

*Your loving friend*

AURELIA R. KING.



ANNA E. HIGGINSON, wife of George M. Higginson, real estate broker, writes to Mrs. Mark Skinner, then in Europe with her husband. The Higginson home stood on North Dearborn just north of Chicago Avenue.



*Elmhurst, Nov. 10, 1871*

DEAR MRS. SKINNER,

I little thought when I received your kind & most welcome letter that so long a time would pass before I acknowledged it, or that so many sorrows & anxieties would crowd the space which lay between your letter & my reply.

I need not tell you of the greatness of the calamity which has fallen upon us. We can all feel that and most of us, I imagine, will feel it more & more as time advances. Men are full of excitement now & hope, the smoke of the battle has as yet not fairly cleared away—the realization, to be followed in many cases by depression & despair, will come soon enough. Nothing can describe the desolation which reigns over the whole North Side & nothing can be more depressing, unless it be the efforts at restoration upon the South. To see the lines of rough sheds which are taking the places of all the magnificent buildings de-

stroyed is simply heart-breaking. Chicago is thrown back now to where it was twenty-five years ago, & I for one do not expect to see it restored to where it was a few short weeks ago. The men of Chicago are heroes; their energy, cheerfulness & determination are something almost sublime; but I fear many a brave heart will sink under difficulties utterly unsurmountable.

You have heard, I have no doubt, account after account of the progress of the fire, so I will not fill my paper with that; indeed it would be a waste of time—no words can give an idea of the horrors of that night. The wind, blowing a hurricane, howling like myriads of evil spirits, drove the flames before it with a force & fierceness which could never be described or imagined; it was not flame but a solid wall of fire which was hurled against the buildings & the houses did not burn, they were simply destroyed. The flames would dash themselves against the sides of a solid block, in one instant passing out through the other side & the whole just melted away & disappeared. The courthouse burned in twenty minutes, while that long block of forty houses on LaSalle St. opposite Lincoln Park, burned in just *seven*. The air was full of cinders; pieces of blazing shingles & boards & great strips of tarred felt fell in every direction, now on the roofs of houses yet unburned & then on the loads of furniture & bedding which people were trying to save & which they were continually obliged to abandon in the street in order to save themselves.

The course of the main body of fire was rather below us, so that the water works & all beyond burned before our house caught & many people thought we would be spared; but the fire worked up gradually along the North Branch & the instant the wind caught it the fire was hurled the whole length of the city; in that way our house was burned at last. As I went out of it & saw the vine-covered walls & the windows filled with



*Chamber of Commerce Building,*

*La Salle and Washington,*

*Before and After*

*the Fire*

flowers all shining so peacefully in the moonlight, it seemed impossible to realize that in a few moments the smoke & flame I saw all around me would seize that too & that I was looking upon my home for the last time. We had time to save most of our furniture if there had been any way of carrying it off or any apparent place of safety for it, the only means of conveyance being a wheelbarrow & our own hands. We saved some clothing, most of our silver & a few pictures, though part of what we rescued from the house was afterwards burned. We succeeded finally in procuring a sand wagon on which we placed ourselves & the few worldly goods which remained to us & rode to the West Side in company with thousands of other refugees like ourselves—dusty, smoky, forlorn in every way, the wind blowing a hurricane, the air full of blinding dust & smoke & behind us our ruined homes, with all their years of accumulated treasures & associations of every kind. It is for those I grieve, not over the loss of money—my Mother's Bible, the clothing & toys of my dead children, all the keepsakes & mementoes of a lifetime.

People sometimes check me for being too despondent when I say I shall never have a home again; a house somewhere, undoubtedly I shall have—I must live out my appointed time—but a house which simply bears the mark of the builder & upholsterer could never be home to me if it were ever so elegant.

We came directly out here to the Bryan's & have been here ever since, most kindly cared for. Indeed, if it be true "that it is more blessed to give than to receive," there must be a great many happy people in the world now, for the outpoured sympathy & kindness of the world is ours & we need it. Hardly a family on the North Side saved a change of clothing, & every shop in the city & every office & bank being burned, no one had any money to purchase anything or anything to purchase if they

# PROCLAMATION!

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The preservation of the good order and peace of the city is hereby entrusted to Lieut. General P. H. Sheridan, U. S. Army.

The Police will act in conjunction with the Lieut. General in the preservation of the peace and quiet of the city, and the Superintendent of Police will consult with him to that end.

The intent hereof being to preserve the peace of the city, without interfering with the functions of the City Government.

Given under my hand this 11th day of October, 1871.

R. B. MASON, Mayor.

were able. You may imagine how I felt on meeting Mrs. Arnold coming from the Relief Society with a bundle of clothing for Mr. Arnold,<sup>1</sup> though I think she felt rather uplifted by the necessity, appearing somewhat in the character of a martyr, & when Dr. Rylance went to see her & seizing her hands with one of his characteristic gushes exclaimed: "You noble woman," I am sure she felt abundantly repaid for all she had undergone.

We have come to the literal fulfillment of the injunction: "Let him that hath two coats, give to him that hath none;" for we all share & share around in a way that partakes very strongly of the ludicrous. I found when I examined the sheet which contained my wardrobe that I had *one* nightgown & six white skirts. Mrs. LeMoyné had fifty homeless ones in her house the night after the fire,<sup>2</sup> not one of whom had a change of clothing. Mrs. Ryerson had on a wrapper & man's hat tied down with a handkerchief. Tille D'Wolf had a calico wrapper with a bed blanket by way of shawl, & in that state appeared at Judge Drummond's.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Winston saved a pink silk dress trimmed with lace, but very little else; one lady had a carriage full of party dresses & another a half dozen bonnets. One man was seen running from the fire with two immense turnips & another with a piece of broken furniture of some kind.

The Rumsey's just succeeded in getting out with all their children, leaving all else behind. Old Mrs. McCagg was taken out at the last moment & forced to run, delicate as she is, to Chicago Ave. where she fell exhausted & would have burned in the street if her friends had not seized an express wagon & placed

<sup>1</sup>Isaac N. Arnold. The Arnolds lived in a large house with spacious grounds at Erie and Pine (now Michigan) streets. The Rev. Joseph H. Rylance, characterized with some acidity, was pastor of St. James Church.

<sup>2</sup>John V. LeMoyné, lawyer, lived in Lake View, then a separate community north of the city.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Drummond, judge of the U. S. Circuit Court, lived in Winfield, a village a short distance west of Wheaton.

her in it. Ezra McCagg has lost every dollar of income & all his fine library, though his pictures were saved; his greenhouses look strangely enough in the midst of all the surrounding desolation.

Washington Park is full of the barracks built by the city for the houseless poor—they are the only neighbors Mr. Ogden has within a mile.<sup>4</sup> One of the men whom we employed for a day told Charlie “that they had not many neighbors, but they were very select!” meaning the Ogdens. I think Mrs. O. feels worse, living in her elegant, untouched house, than we do who are altogether homeless, & I do not wonder at it, as they live in fear of their lives, with their house watched day & night by policemen.

The Arnolds have taken a small furnished house on the South Side & one servant. The Scudders are with them;<sup>5</sup> poor Mary lost all her wedding presents; what were not burned in the house were melted in Mr. Magie’s lot where they buried them. The Magies had a very narrow escape, as they waited in the house loth to give it up till the fence took fire & were both severely burned; indeed, they gave up all hopes of life & went & stood under one of the trees in their yard to wait for the end, when they saw a place where the fence had burned away & rushed through.<sup>6</sup>

Albert Munger has lost about four hundred thousand dollars, Mr. Ogden about three millions. The losses of that whole family

<sup>4</sup>The home of Mahlon D. Ogden, which miraculously escaped the fire, was located where the Newberry Library now stands, facing what was then called Washington Park.

<sup>5</sup>A daughter and son-in-law of Isaac N. Arnold.

<sup>6</sup>The residence of H. H. Magie stood in an entire block bounded by Ontario, Ohio, State and Cass (now Wabash) streets. The grounds were surrounded by a high picket fence which prevented escape until the fire burned out a section. Lambert Tree (Magie’s son-in-law), his wife, child, and the child’s nurse were in the Magie home at the time, and had a similar harrowing experience.

are tremendous as they were insured almost entirely in home companies. Mr. Ryerson too, seems to be very much injured by the fire (financially I mean). Mrs. King is out here at their little country place. Mr. King lost heavily, but his credit is unimpaired, so he feels in very good spirits, as he stands with Field, Leiter & Co. & a few others among those who mean to pay dollar for dollar. It must be a great mortification for J. V. Farwell to be obliged to ask for time. I understand that Mr. Bross has lost almost everything but his picture, which he was seen during the fire carrying off on horseback—the only thing he saved.<sup>7</sup> Jessie has behaved nobly, as of course she would; it is said she [is] looking for a situation of some kind. Clarence Dyer had just got nicely settled in his own house & has lost that & his coal yard which must be very hard for him. They were with Mrs. Turnley immediately after the fire;<sup>8</sup> I have not heard since.

All in that part of the town were driven by the flames toward the lake & most of them suffered terribly. Mary Howe & her baby took refuge on the pier with the Arnolds & many others & were there for hours.<sup>9</sup> Some went into the lake itself; some got off in small boats & were out all night before they could get back again. Thousands were out on the prairie & in Lincoln Park all night exposed to the heavy rain which came just twenty-four hours too late. Essie Stockton was married the Thursday

<sup>7</sup>See p. 43, note 3.

<sup>8</sup>P. T. Turnley, vice president of the Traders' National Bank, lived on South Wabash beyond the range of the fire. The Dyer home was on Pine (now Michigan Avenue) a short distance north of the river.

<sup>9</sup>"William B. Ogden had lately constructed a long pier, north of, and parallel with, the old United States pier, which prolonged the left bank of the river out into the lake, and this had been filled with stone, but had not been planked over; hence it would not readily burn. It was a hard road to travel, but it seemed the safest place; and Mr. Arnold and his children worked their way far out upon this pier. With much difficulty, the party crossed from the Ogden slip, in a small row-boat, and entered the light-house, where they, with Judge Goodrich, Edward I. Tinkham, and others, were hospitably received." Andreas, *History of Chicago*, II, 748.



*The New England  
Congregationalist Church,  
Dearborn and White  
(Now Locust) Streets*

after the fire in a white petticoat with a morning dress looped over it & departed on her wedding trip with her "trousseau" tied up in a pillow case! Louise Goodwin & her devoted went off on theirs with passes furnished by the Relief Society! The sick had a terrible time—one lady with a baby a few days old got up from her bed & walked a mile; one with a baby a *few minutes* old was laid on a mattress & driven off in a wagon; hundreds of children were born on the prairies the next few days—but all those things you can imagine.

I fear I have written a very incoherent letter, for I seem to have lost my faculties since the fire. I hardly remember from hour to hour what I am doing, though the last few nights I have begun to sleep more & hope soon to feel better. I long to hear of you all. With much love for all,

*Yours most affectionately*

ANNA E. HIGGINSON.

ADELINE ROSSITER JUDD (*Mrs. Norman B. Judd*)  
also writes to Mrs. Mark Skinner. Since the Judds lived  
in Kenwood, a suburb on the lake in the vicinity of what  
is now 42nd Street, they escaped the fire.



*Kenwood, Nov. 23, 1871*

MY DEAR MRS. SKINNER,

During the summer I often said to Mr. Judd: "As soon as the children leave for school I shall write to Mrs. Skinner and give her all the Chicago news." There were many pleasant things to tell you of—the pretty half-rural wedding of Mary Arnold with the tables spread on the lawn—a delightful trip made with the Wadsworths & Williams from Waukegan to Geneva, and a week of boating & picnicing—a trip to Kansas with a large party including the President and his family,<sup>1</sup> & other incidents which we thought you would be interested in, and which it seems strange I should ever remember after all the whirl and excitement & interest of the last few weeks.

As I said, I intended writing as soon as the children left, as

<sup>1</sup>Judd, a staunch Republican who was minister to Prussia from 1861 to 1865 and a member of Congress 1867 to 1871, was on good terms with President Grant.



*The Second Presbyterian Church,  
Northeast Corner of Wabash  
and Washington Streets*

I wished to devote myself entirely to them whilst they remained, but the day before Minnie left the fire came, and since then my time has been so occupied that I could not get time. Those of us who still have houses & clothing are busy caring for the sufferers every spare moment. I can realize with what intense solicitude you have watched & waited for news; as we were abroad during the War & watched and waited in the same way for news from battlefields and sieges, only the enemy was of another kind, but scarcely less to be feared.

I suppose you get the news as reported in the newspapers but you will be glad to hear something of your personal friends. Mrs. Wadsworth left her house when the buildings on the rear were on fire, in a carriage attached to an express wagon, taking some clothing, dishes, pictures and a few relics from his writing desk, & drove to Lincoln Park where they remained for hours. She sat by the margin of the pond with her dress drawn closely around her, ready, should a burning brand light her dress, to step into the pond. Sometime before she left the house she sent the little boys with Mrs. Yoe to Peter L. Yoe's.<sup>2</sup> Soon after they crossed Rush Street bridge it fell, and the carriage could not return. She found her children Monday evening at Mr. Cobb's after a long search for them. Of Tommy she could hear nothing before Tuesday evening and his escape between long lines of burning houses with a wagon drawn by himself, containing clothing etc. was one which called into action all the heroism & judgment & character the boy possessed.

*November 29th.* The very cold weather & over-exertion in our Relief work has made me so miserable of late that my letter to you has remained untouched in my portfolio.

<sup>2</sup>The *Chicago Directory, 1870-1871* locates P. L. Yoe at 200 Michigan Avenue. So many Wadsworths and Cobbs are listed that those mentioned here cannot be identified with certainty.



*St. James Church,  
Cass and Huron  
Streets*

Before this you have probably heard from other friends of the adventures and escapes of your many friends—of the night on the prairie by Mr. & Mrs. Magie drenched by the rain, and smarting with burns—of Mr. & Mrs. Tree who with a host of others stood 14 hours knee deep in the water—of Mr. Arnold & three children who escaped on a tug—of Mrs. McCagg who begged Carrie to leave her to her fate, and try to save her own life, when weary and exhausted she felt she could not go another step in that fearful race in which the fire in many places outstripped the fastest walker.

Mrs. Arnold left her home to look after Mary. She found Mr. Scudder was burying trunks, silver, etc. in Mr. Magie's garden. A few minutes after she entered, he came in and informed them they must hasten for their lives.

Mr. Magie's house was in flames, their own kitchen was taking fire, and when they reached the sidewalk, the fire was one long line of blaze along the outer edge of the sidewalk. They turned northward but before they reached the corner north of them the fire had out-travelled them, and the block beyond was on fire. They turned westward as the only way of escape, and after great fatigue—once passing in the middle of the street between two long lines of burning houses, the air so full of fire that they had to cover their mouths—at last reached a German house where the inmates gave them coffee and a place to rest. It was not long however before a new line of fire was seen travelling directly towards them, and they started on a new race for life, crossed to the West Side & in the afternoon took the cars for Judge Drummond's.

Mrs. Arnold did not know of the safety of her husband, Kitty, Florence & Arthur until Tuesday afternoon & she had left them with Alice Sunday night about 3 o'clock.

It was well for your family that you were away & escaped all

the horrors of that memorable night and day. Sad as it is to know that all your house contained, with the associations of thirty years clustering around your books, your pictures, your vases and relics of your past lives, yet that is better than to have been here, and seen it swept away before your own eyes.<sup>3</sup> It is not the brick walls that made home so dear, but the many articles around which the passing years have woven a chain of associations inseparably connected with the early life, the birth, the childhood, the lives, & alas, the departure of those we love. A new home can never be all that the dear old home has been, & I never think of you with all these treasures swept away, without a feeling of pain and tender sympathy.

I met Mrs. Phillips on the cars recently. She told me she had not thought of their house being in danger until 10 minutes before their barn was in flames—that she said to her daughter: "We will put some of our clothing into a sheet & try to save it for I fear the fire is coming this way." A moment later the daughter exclaimed: "The barn is on fire." They hurriedly gathered a few articles of clothing which they carried in their hands and rushed out of the house. The sidewalk was on fire & they had to hasten rapidly and walked a long distance in the direction of Lincoln Park when Mrs. John Douglas overtook them & they entered her carriage and drove to Evanston.

Those who had carriages escaped with little danger, but those who had not, suffered from fatigue and exposure fearfully. It is a strange sight to go over the burnt district & see the shanties covering the ground once covered with fine buildings and residences. A great many of the North Side residents assert that they will never live there again—that the recollections are too painful, and that they will locate where the southwest wind

<sup>3</sup>The Skinner residence stood on the southwest corner of Rush and Ontario streets. It burned about 3:30 A.M. on October 9.



*Booksellers  
Row, State  
Street Between  
Washington and Madison, and  
One of the Row Buildings  
After the Fire*

cannot again carry destruction to their homes—but I think that when some of the more courageous ones have rebuilt & the churches are again in their old places, the feeling of desolation will disappear & very many rebuild on their old sites.

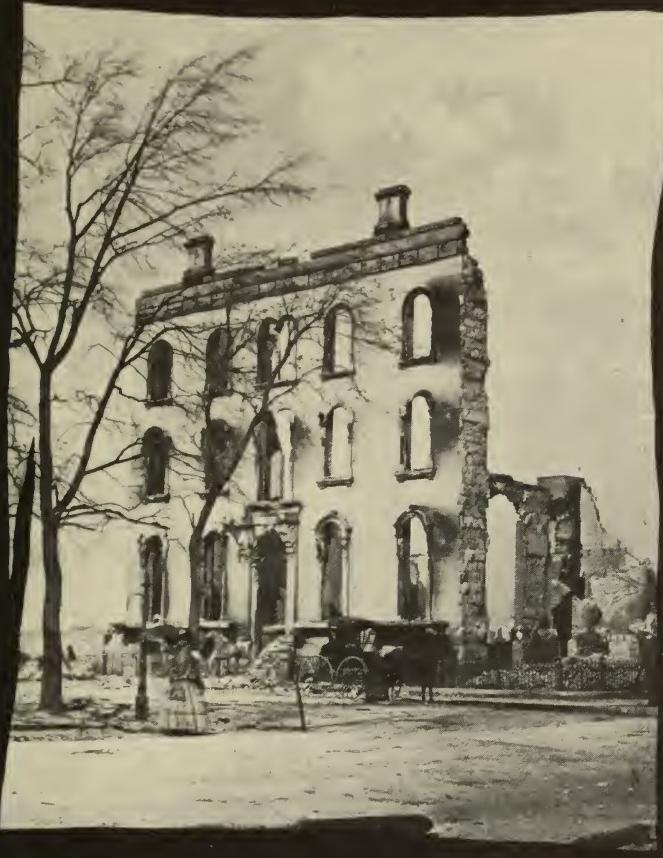
*December 15.* My dear friend—Mr. Judd has just given me your letter dated Paris Nov. 29th, written the same day on which a part of this letter was written to you. Is not this a singular coincidence? I had dated it Dec. 29th, but as that day is some way off in the future, I had misdated & it was really written whilst you were writing to me.

I have been having another sick week, which interferes sadly with all my plans, especially my letter writing. Mrs. Hoge came down to lunch on Tuesday & invited us to lunch with her on Wednesday & promised we should meet Mrs. Wadsworth, Mrs. Dickinson & Mrs. Blatchford, all of whom are now living at Evanston. Mr. Judd went with me, and we had a delightful visit. All were in good spirits & I don't know when I have heard such a flow of wit & repartee & pleasant sayings.

We took the evening train for Lake Forest & returned home the following morning. We are expecting Ned home for Christmas, but Minnie, poor child, must spend her first Christmas without seeing her father and mother.

The young ladies at Farmington have worked nobly for the sufferers. They made up a barrel of comfortable children's clothing & a box of infants' clothing which was sent to our Hyde Park Aid Society. We have been very busy taking care of the families who have come into Hyde Park. Last week we made clothing for a baby a month old, and who had been wrapped in an old blanket & never worn a garment & before the fire the parents were people in good circumstances surrounded by every comfort.

Mrs. Blair has been very active & her house has been a depot



*Residence  
of the Rt. Rev.  
Thomas Foley, Bishop of  
Chicago, Madison at Michigan*

for supplies. I must tell you of the munificence of the Gurnees. Mr. Gurnee sent me \$500, Mrs. Gurnee \$250 for the "Home" and yesterday I received an additional \$100 & a promise of \$200 more from Irvington friends. Mr. Farnum sent \$5000 to the Relief Society & Mr. Gardner also a liberal donation, though both lost largely by the fire.

How wonderful to see the whole world moved by our great calamity & pouring out gold without stint for our relief. There is much suffering although so much is done to relieve it. The families of young men whose salaries are cut off & who lost everything & are too proud or too sensitive to make their wants known. Widows and women dependent on their own exertions. One society here was established especially to look after such cases, but we have had all manner of people applying for aid & those who were ready to work have been continually overtasked. We hope every week that we shall find some limit to our work, but the throng who come to the church where we hold our meetings was as large as ever yesterday. We meet on Fridays at the church at Hyde Park and on Tuesdays at Mrs. Higgins' to sew and give out supplies.

Mr. Judd and myself had intended leaving here early in November, and after making Minnie a visit, & spending a few weeks in Washington, to go to Florida. After the fire that plan was abandoned.

Mr. Sperry thought Mr. Skinner might find it necessary to return & had you done so, we should have insisted on your coming directly to our house. You know our children are all absent, and only my niece, Miss Chace, is with us. We have therefore room for you all including Mr. & Mrs. Willing & knowing your love for flowers, I had many of mine potted so that you might enjoy their beauty during this desolate season. Had you returned, we should have been glad to have you remain

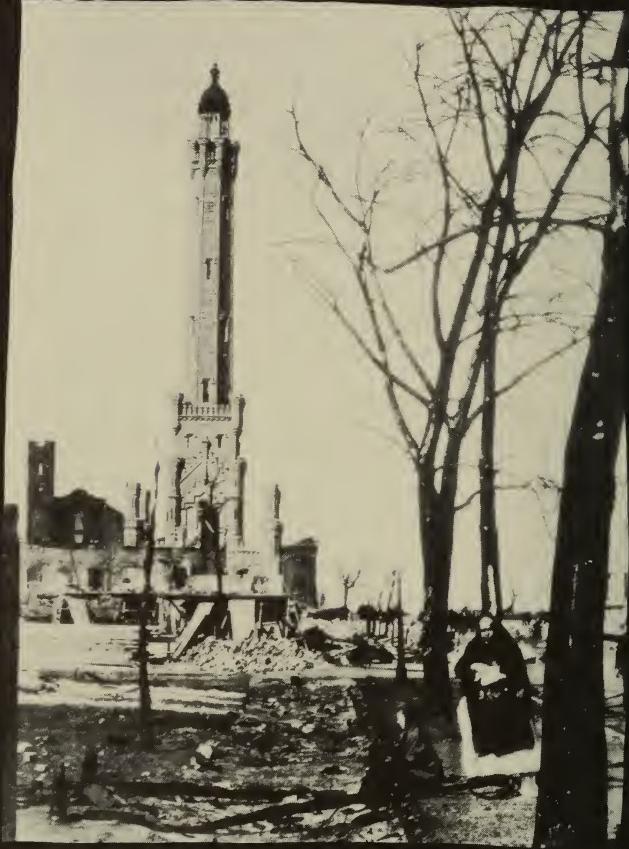
either with us, or if we leave, have occupied the house in our absence.

In all the desolation of homes, I should have felt happier to have had our house occupied than to close it, as we probably shall, if we conclude to go South, as we may yet. The cold weather makes me ill & I suffer so much that I long to get away, & yet it is God's will that I remain. I shall try to make myself happy & do all I can to make those around me so.

I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed your allusions to Switzerland, Munich etc. . . .

I don't want to weary you—you can take a rainy day to read this—but I want to say one word about the fire. There must have been some chemical causes for a conflagration like that, other than those that usually prevail. The weather had been dry and sultry—no rain and scarcely a thunderstorm during the summer. It is thought by many that the atmosphere must have been surcharged with electrical currents which caused such rapid combustion. In some places cast steel bars were melted and fused into a compact mass, when the structure in which they were, had burned completely to the ground in seven minutes from the moment the fire struck it—a compact mass that looked like raw iron, when there was not wood enough in the building to have made a fire which could have melted common iron. The courthouse burned within 15 minutes; Armour's building at the head of Dearborn Park was completely burned & only a debris of brick & plaster left, in seven minutes—Wirt Dexter timed it.

Blocks of granite lying in the street and not yet used for building purposes were chipped and broken by the currents of hot air which swept over them. The same causes must have ruled in the rapid conflagrations in Michigan and Wisconsin. It is asserted by survivors that balls of fire were borne on the



*The Water Tower*

blast over the woods setting fire to new localities where no danger was apprehended.

It is strange that so many thought the day of the final destruction of the earth had come.

My husband says I am getting tired & you certainly will be, so I will stop although I am tempted to begin another sheet. Excuse scratches and interlineations.

I shall be very, very glad to hear from you again. Love to all. I read Lizzie's letter to Mrs. Blair with much interest. I hope Fanny is improving. Remember us to Judge Skinner & believe me ever and truly

*Your sincere friend*

A. R. JUDD



SAMUEL STONE, assistant librarian of the Chicago Historical Society, describes the burning of the Society's building in a letter to William Barry, through whose efforts the Society was founded in 1856. Its building, first occupied in 1868, stood on the northwest corner of Dearborn and Ontario streets.



Chicago, March 26, 1872

REVD. WM. BARRY, *Secretary of the Chicago Historical Society.*

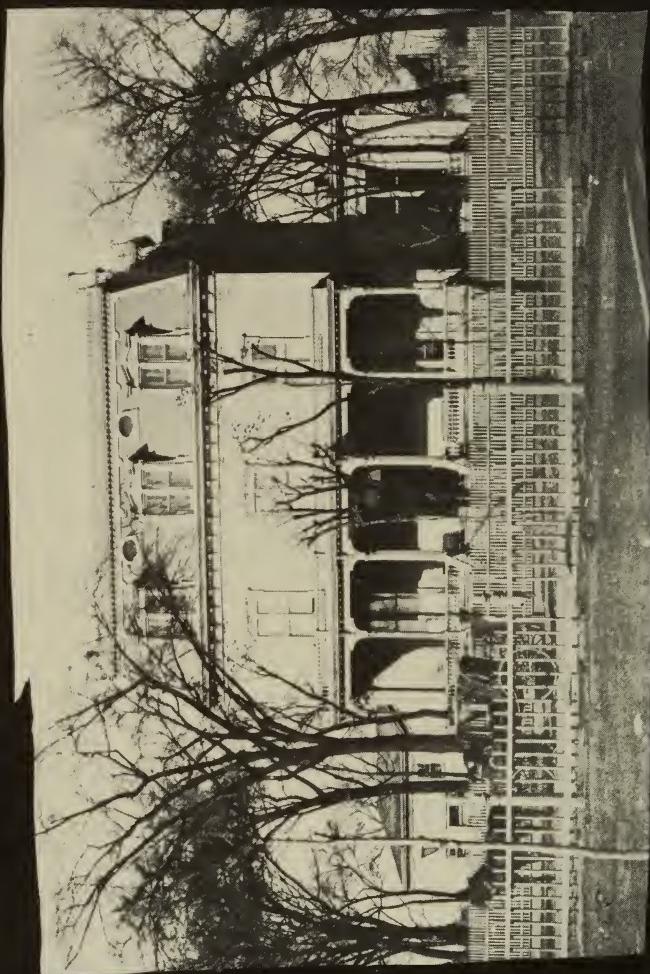
DEAR SIR,

Herewith is my brief facts & escape from Chicago Historical Society building and my doings while there.

Between 1 and 2 o'clock on the morning of the 9th of Oct. 1871 I was awakened by severe ringing of my house bell. On jumping out of bed, I was told "the city was on fire." About 2 o'clock I made from my house No. 612 North Clark Street,<sup>1</sup> south about one & half miles—there found Clark Street bridge on fire and all eastward towards the lake enveloped in flame.

I then returned north to the Historical Society rooms. Mr. Wm. Corkran, the librarian in charge, was receiving trunks,

<sup>1</sup>Between Schiller Street and North Avenue.



The Mahlon D. Ogden Home,  
Facing Washington Square. This Building  
Escaped the Fire

boxes and bundles through the basement cellar door.<sup>2</sup> About 3 o'clock sparks of fire were flying near the building. I thought it prudent to prevent any more goods liable to ignite to be deposited—particularly cotton bundles. I told Mr. Corkran the danger. I then immediately took charge of the basement door. Mr. Corkran left for outside, packages continued to come, pressing urgently to be admitted. Duty and danger warranted me stubbornly [to] refuse to open the door. Consequently much abuse toward me. As I could not close the door to lock it (some object at the bottom outside prevented) I was obliged to press against it. After a few minutes Mr. Corkran sang out to me from outside to allow the janitor to the hydrant (in the basement cellar) for two pails of water, saying "the sidewalk [is] on fire." He was admitted but I have no further recollection about him.

Few minutes after a Mrs. Stone in the family of Mr. E. W. Griffin opposite of the Society building, was the last person [to] come to the door with a loud voice through the roaring wind calling me by name and giving her name begging me to receive a small box. I received it saying something that I was in danger—few minutes previous two voices calling me to come out—I was in danger. Believing the building was in danger and as soon as I could leave, I canted a trunk against the door & made for the north end of the basement cellar. I mounted the upper shelf of newspapers, lying on my back with my feet closed the northwest basement (4 light) window. Here I observed in the rear, every part of the yard and the heavens full of flying sparks and some fire brands. I next hurried up one flight of stairs into the reception room, thence up another flight into the upper library room.

<sup>2</sup>The Historical Society building was considered to be the safest structure in the city as far as fire-resistant qualities were concerned.

At this moment a terrible blast of wind, fire and smoke filled the entire Ontario Street in front. The entire casement of the front window was in a blaze, hanging like feathers on every inch of the window. I immediately hurried down into the reception room to get the record book and Lincoln Proclamation.<sup>3</sup> Not finding the record book I attempted to break the frame containing the Proclamation to take from it the Proclamation and fold it under my coat, it being in a stout frame. Not a moment more to stop. Abandoned the frame. At this moment again the wind and fire filled the whole heavens frightfully, dashing fire brands against the reception room windows. A chinking I heard seemed from above, probably from the upper window or roofing broke in. Believing a minute more to try to save the Proclamation would be too late for my escape, I next made for the basement door, stamped fire out of two bundles and canted back the trunk to escape. The strong suffocation from smoking bundles outside of basement door prevented. I then tore open the third bundle (smoking), snatched from it a shawl, covered my head and sprang out with [as] much speed as possible, leaving the door little open. I could not shut it.

At a glance I could see the steps overhead, the sidewalk, front fence, Mr. Girard cottage and every building south in one mass of blaze & firebrands flying furiously. My only escape was to the rear of Mr. Girard cottage in a midst of dense smoke. Not a moment to feel for the gate. With a bound upon a box or something next to the fence I sprang over the low picket fence into Dearborn Street. At this moment a blaze, probably

<sup>3</sup>The original of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863. The President had donated it to be sold for the benefit of Chicago's first Sanitary Fair, opened in October, 1863. Thomas B. Bryan purchased the document and presented it to the Soldiers' Home. The managers of this institution placed it in the Historical Society after the new building was completed in 1868.



*Ruins of the E. B. McCagg Home,  
North Clark Near Chicago Avenue,  
Showing the Undamaged  
Conservatories*

from Mr. Girard building, struck me with much force. I felt it to my skin. I dropt my burnt shawl and ran to the corner of Erie St., following me in the middle Dearborn St. a bellowing cow with scorched back. Again another terrible blast of wind forced the poor cow out of sight in dark smoke to the east. I purposely dropt down on my hands [to] prevent being blown down for such was the force. I next made to mount one of the high stone steps of the three brick buildings facing south on Erie Street between Dearborn and North Clark Street directly in rear of Chicago Historical Society building, to take the last look of the destruction of our fifteen (15) years of labor of valuable gatherings. The entire front, top & sides of the building was in one mass of flame and everything surrounding. It was painful to see it. The heat being too intense, I was obliged to leave to the west. There were no persons near me. All the houses were abandoned.

As I came to the corner of Dearborn and Erie Street from the Society building, a woman was running directly east into the fire. I understood a woman was found burnt near there. At this moment a great blast of wind and smoke, seemingly a blaze of about 200 to 300 feet in length, perhaps 150 feet in height, passed nearly over me little to the right making N.E. diagonally, pouring the entire volume over two entire blocks into the top of the spire of the Church of Holy Name, situated east side of State Street between Huron and Superior Sts. In an instant the top was in a blaze. There were moments I could see buildings appear to melt down from three to five minutes. Such sights I never saw before.

Had I known the speed and heat of the coming fire, I could have left my post at the basement door earlier and secured the records and Proclamation. The unprecedeted calamity was beyond all of my experience. Another fact worth noticing.



The Chicago  
Historical Society  
Building  
After the Fire

# CHICAGO NOT YET ALL DESTROYED!

OFFICE OF "THE KIRBY,"  
No. 600 South MORGAN STREET,  
CHICAGO, ILL., October 14, 1871.

To OUR AGENTS AND FRIENDS:

GENTLEMEN.—The story of terrible destruction by fire in this city, from last Saturday night to Monday night, cannot have failed to reach you. We dare attempt no description of it. No history will ever be written, no picture ever painted that will convey to those who did not witness it, more than a faint realization of its utter devastation.

We print this on our little press in our own office, as the most available means of informing you that **WE ARE SAFE**; that the fire was not in the vicinity of our warehouses, and our **only** losses are through other parties who **ARE** sufferers.

We are adding our "mite" to the bounteous charity of the whole world in aid of the suffering, and hope to promptly receive from all who are inclined to us—**AND WHO ARE** **NOT** **SUFFERERS**—that which is due.

Remittances, for the present, should be made in Currency by Express, Drafts on New York, or in Post Office Orders; as all Drafts on Chicago for a time, will need to be **RETURNED**, causing great delay, inconvenience and loss of the use of money.

Very respectfully,

**D. M. OSBORNE & CO.,**

By DANIEL RANSOM.

While I was on the high stone steps on Erie St. I saw the entire west side of the Society building in one great sheet of blaze burning apparently every brick. There was no woodwork on that side of the building. The fact of Mrs. Stone above mentioned calling me by name and giving her name in the hearing of persons near her gave reason of some to [tell] the Press that "Old Col. Stone and wife perished." In regard to others sheltered in the Chi. Hist. Socy fireproof building supposed perished. If there, they would have been seen by me, unless they were hidden in the Lecture room and in the wash room. It is fair to presume I was the last person [who] left the Chicago Historical building.

Mr. E. W. Griffin, owner of the buildings south side and opposite the Society building on Ontario St. remaining, so he told me, to the last in and near his houses, backing north by the force of heat on Dearborn St. and knowing I was in the Society building and but one way to escape—not seeing me, presumed I had perished.

*Letter to Rev. Wm. Barry, Secy.* DEAR SIR—Allow me to state some facts of the burning of the Chicago Historical Society building Oct. 9, 1871. As life is uncertain and believing I was the last person [who] left it, I have penned all facts from entering [to] leaving the building that came to my knowledge. I do not wish to come into controversy with others who have made statements, nor to have my letter appear sensational to call sympathy, but to be credited, if thought worthy, after reading the accompanying statement.

*Very truly yours,*

SAM. STONE

Chicago, March 26, 1872.



## *Conclusion*

THIRTY YEARS OF PROSPERITY CANNOT RESTORE US," wrote Jonas Hutchinson while the fire was still burning. In an incredibly short time his prophecy was proved to be wrong. Rebuilding began before the ruins were cold. Within two years bare ground in the business section was worth more than the same land, with buildings on it, had been worth before the fire. In the same short period the value of the city's manufactures doubled. By 1875, few traces of the catastrophe were to be found.

In spite of the fire and a major depression, Chicago's population rose from 300,000 in 1870 to 500,000 in 1880, and then leaped to more than a million at the turn of the century. By that time it was clear that the fire, while destroying lives and property, had also spurred an ambitious, hard-working people to produce a greater, fairer city.





*The Chicago Historical Society*  
*Founded 1856*

FOR NINETY YEARS the Chicago Historical Society has preserved and disseminated the history of Chicago, the Middle West, and the nation. Its museum portrays the history of this country in chronological sequence, beginning with the Spanish explorers, ending with World War II. Its permanent exhibits are kept in harmony with changing historical emphasis; frequent current exhibits give it constant timeliness. Each year some 200,000 adults and children derive from it a lasting understanding of the contributions which their forebears—nameless men and women as well as such heroic Americans as Washington and Lincoln—made to their country.

The Society's library contains a notable collection of historical material of all kinds—books, pamphlets, newspapers, broadsides, maps, manuscripts, prints, photographs, and such ephemera as trade cards, menus, and theater programs. The library is concerned primarily with Chicago and its environs, but it also contains rich materials on Illinois and the Old Northwest.

The Society publishes a quarterly magazine, "Chicago History," and occasional special publications such as this.

The Trustees of the Chicago Historical Society hold that full knowledge of the past is an essential element in sound patriotism, and in this belief conduct its activities.



#### COLOPHON

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\$3.00

"The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was the most spectacular event in the city's history. It became a livid scar of memory for those who experienced it; even today it is the one episode of a great city's manifold past that the youngest schoolchild is certain to know. And even today, though seventy-five years have passed, it points morals. Its story continues to warn that only the narrowest margin separates man from nature, and that nature, ordinarily kindly, may be implacably destructive. It is also proof of man's ability, given faith, courage, and determination, to surmount even the greatest catastrophe." *Editor's Foreword*



THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

*Distributed by*

V A L E N T I N E — N E W M A N

16 N. MICHIGAN AVE.

CHICAGO

# **RELIEF FOR CHICAGO**

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The citizens of Rockford are requested to meet at

**Brown's Hall,**

**This Tuesday Evening, Oct. 10, '71,**

**AT 7 1-2 O'CLOCK,** to devise means for the im-  
mediate

## **RELIEF OF THE DESTITUTE**

Of Chicago, whose misfortunes appeal so loudly to our sympathy and benevolence. **Let Every Man Come.**

## **COOKED FOOD WANTED.**

---

A telegram from the Rockford Committee, to Mayor Bronson, received this morning, reads as follows :

"One hundred thousand people are on the open prairie, without food. Let every family that can spare a pound of meat or bread, give it at once. Send nothing but Cooked Food."

Send contributions to Brown's Hall, day and evening.

The Rockford Committee will return from Chicago this evening, and report to the meeting to-night.

The Mayor of Chicago telegraphs this morning that people of neighboring towns are requested not to come there at present.

**By Order of Relief Committee.**

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**Register Print, Rockford, Illinois.**